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ABSTRACT

A study of college students who dropped out of sport programs found that while many students ended their sport careers between their freshman and senior years, a large number of them became involved in sport after college. This paper examines the sociological factors that have an impact upon participation or non-participation in sport programs. The following factors are discussed: (1) interactions with the athletic coach, either positive or negative; (2) parental influences and attitudes; (3) support and approval from peers; (4) team composition; (5) formal and informal social arrangements within the sport league; (6) social class; (7) ethnic or racial background; and (8) gender. Some recommendations are made for research methods that might be useful in future studies. A three-page list of references concludes the document. (JD)

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The Dropout Phenomenon: Sociological Perspectives

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The Dropout Phenomenon:

Sociological Perspectives

For a variety of reasons, sport participation has become a more integral aspect of American lifestyle. During the past ten to fifteen years we have witnessed an unprecedented increase in participation levels for individuals of all ages. Yet, whenever the issue of attrition or dropping out is considered, attention seems to focus solely on children. Yet, the process of leaving sport prematurely can affect thousands of individuals, female as well as male, of varying age levels. Having said this, however, when we examine the literature, we find that what we know about dropouts comes primarily from data generated from youth.

The majority of this existing research has been based on a motivational framework, with particular attention paid to: specific reasons for entering and consequently for leaving sport programs; achievement goals or orientations of athletes; or perceived ability/competency estimates of those who have dropped out and those who remain in sport programs. Results from such research have been somewhat fruitful, because we do have some descriptive patterns that provide a general picture of the dropout. For instance, reasons for dropping out may vary according to age level. It seems that younger participants

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react more to: the competitive structure of programs that constantly stress winning; to coaching behavior, particularly direct feedback that reflects on poor individual or team play, or to not enough playing time -- each of which detracts from the enjoyment or fun element (Orlick, 1974; Pooley, 1981). Although more recent interpretation of children's data suggests that dropping out may be a reflection of low ability, lack of skill improvement, or not being as good as originally believed (Feltz & Petlichkoff, 1983; Roberts, Kleiber & Duda, 1981), we need to know more about the nature of the sport experience before we totally dismiss lack of enjoyment as a factor. In contrast to reasons offered by younger children, research suggests that adolescents and intercollegiate athletes seem to drop out of sport because of conflict of interests, alternative activities, reappraisal of skill or ability level, or sport playing a less central role at the present time than it did during an earlier period (Blinde, 1986; Brown, 1985; Gould, et al., 1982; Gould, 1986).

We have also learned that dropping out is related to low perceived competence or incompatibility between goals and outcomes -- that is, reasons for participation have not been met by the sport experience (Burton & Martens, 1986). And finally, relative to all of these findings, there seem to be gender differences in patterns: females tend to dropout at earlier ages and in larger numbers (Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1979), and there

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possibly may be a relationship between perceived competence in sport and sex role socialization, which causes females to be lower in self-confidence in masculine-typed tasks (Corbin & Nix, 1979; Feltz & Petlichkoff, 1983).

These findings suggest that the process is quite complex, and despite our efforts to describe the underlying reasons or determinants that explain sport attrition, we have been somewhat limited in our explanations and levels of understanding. The question is how can we more fully describe the dropout process and arrive at a more complete understanding. One way might be to combine perspectives used by both psychology and sociology. The advantage would be the inclusion of some contextual or situational factors along with those cognitive factors currently employed in research. Before going into specifics, however, allow me to explain how I became interested in the topic of dropouts.

A few years ago a colleague and I began to study intercollegiate sport retirement. In the process of examining the descriptive data we observed a peculiar and unexpected pattern. Although the majority of athletes had completed their eligibility, 38% had ended their college sport careers prematurely. For some reason, several of these athletes had dropped out voluntarily. More interesting, however, was the fact that these "dropouts," along with the "retirees," were currently involved in sport. You might imagine our amazement to

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discover that 75% of our sample was involved in sport after college, and that there was no significant difference between dropouts or retirees in this post college participation.

Because we didn't anticipate these patterns we had no information to help us explain the two observed patterns: the temporary withdrawal that occurred between the freshman and senior years of college, and the continued involvement beyond these athletes' college sport careers. There was nothing in the data to suggest the first pattern, because childhood and adolescent socialization/participation patterns were identical. During their college years, however, these athletes did differ on several sport related dimensions -- devotion and commitment to sport, importance of sport, and identification with sport. Remember, these differences did not emerge until the freshman year and they disappeared following graduation. Obviously, this left us with several unanswered questions. The data also piqued our curiosity relative to the second pattern, because it forced us to examine some beliefs and underlying assumptions that relate to both dropping out and retirement.

First of all, how is retirement different from dropping out, or is dropping out merely a form of volúntary retirement? The more important issue, however, is whether our terminology truly matches the phenomenon(a?) that we have been studying. Are we in need of more or better conceptual definitions? For example, it appears that we have assumed that retirement and dropping out

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signify some type of termination of sport participation -- total withdrawal from the activity of sport. Yet dropout data, similar to recent retirement data, suggest that withdrawal may be only from a specific program, level of competition or even from a particular sport. The question is whether we are dealing with more than one phenomenon or if it is the same phenomenon occurring in varying degree.

Somewhat related to this point is the recent attempt to distinguish "burnout" from "dropout." In the first instance withdrawal may be total or complete because a once enjoyable activity has become an aversive source of stress. In contrast dropping out could be due to a change in interest or a value reorientation (Smith, 1986). Such a distinction forces us to come to grips with two important considerations: 1) how clear have our conceptual definitions been relative to the nature and extent of the dropout phenomenon; and 2) have we been too narrow in our approach so that we are left with an overly simplistic view of a rather complex process. In many respects the burnout article by Smith (1986) helps us address both considerations because it provides both a conceptual basis from which we can generate research questions as well as a potential framework from which we can explain our empirical findings.

If we use Smith's approach as one example, then we might consider incorporating additional approaches. More specifically, we could consider the dropout phenomenon from a

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perspective that includes contextual as well as motivational factors. In this way we could examine how several factors interact so as to influence sport continuation or attrition. Obviously such a proposal is not new, because interactionists have advocated the examination of person variables with situation variables for a long time. Unfortunately, we do not have much dropout research that emanates from such a perspective. What I'd like to do with the time remaining is make some suggestions along this line that might enhance our understanding.

To begin with, let's discuss sport socialization for a few minutes. Our research on this topic suggests that we can explain determinants of sport involvement fairly well by considering influences from significant others, normative settings that encompass expectation sets and influences, and situational factors that provide information about opportunities, the social milieu, and social structure (Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978; McPherson, 1978). For example several research findings indicate that identification and imitation of role models, significant other expectancies, and rewards and positive reinforcements all influence sport involvement (Orlick, 1972). It would stand to reason, then, that decisions to continue or discontinue might also be related to similar influences. Consideration of personal experiences in sport, reinforcement contingencies, and general socialization

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influences might tell us much more about dropping out than we've previously considered. For example in a recent study, Brown (1985) found that withdrawal from sport was a process that occurred over time during which individuals gradually divested themselves of involvement and identification with the sport role. Commitment was a critical factor, as was the degree of social support received for participation. In short, Brown found that withdrawal could be explained by considering various socialization factors.

Inclusion of factors external to the individual would further broaden our perspectives in other dimensions as well. For example, despite the fact that young children claim they dropout because of the competitive emphasis of the sports program, relatively little research attention has been given to the structure, organization and value climate generated by sports programs themselves. Reasons for including program characteristics relate to several studies that have demonstrated that type of league, level of participation, and nature of formalized structure influence the degree to which participants themselves stress winning, playing for fun, or mastery of skills (Maloney & Petrie, 1972; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981; Nixon, 1980; Smith, 1978).) One recent study dealing with these socialization effects demonstrated that participants in educational leagues emphasized playing or participating and sportsmanship over winning; they also valued being part of a

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team and with friends as important as competing against others. In contrast those in competitive leagues valued competition, winning and improving social status over playing (Dubois, 1986).

Although implications from these studies have not yet been related to dropping out, it would seem that there might be fruitful hypothesis testing if we consider how distinctive features of competitive structure might interact with reasons for participation or satisfaction of those reasons. Including these contextual variables in research designs could also shed some light on how program philosophy and operating principles also contribute to the social setting that influences decisions to remain or drop out of sport.

Closely related to factors pertaining to program value structure and philosophy are variables associated with the coach. Such variables could include a variety of dimensions, ranging from specific behaviors and interactions with participants, such as feedback, praise, and criticism to those that relate more to style, mannerisms, attitude and normative expectations. For example, Harris (1983, 1984) recently found that children's conceptualization of their baseball experience was closely related to the coaches' characterizations. What makes this study particularly relevant here is that despite the fact that these children represented two different ethnic groups, their conceptualizations seemed to be shaped more by the coach and their sporting experience than by ethnic

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characteristics. Obviously, each one of these factors could shape the value climate that either promotes or constrains continued involvement in sport.

Additional factors that could also influence the decision to dropout revolve around influences from specific reference groups, particularly those exerted by the family and by the peer group. Whereas previous findings have suggested that participant expectations and satisfaction of reasons determine whether individuals decide to continue or not, it seems that similar information about parental expectations and behaviors could tell us more about withdrawing from sport. For example, how do parents influence children's sport participation? To what extent does their public behavior in the stands invade the child's domain of sport? How does private encouragement or criticism from parents affect decisions to remain or dropout? Although some studies have surveyed parent orientations (Burton & Martens, 1985; Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978), other dimensions of how parents provide social support or disapproval need to be analyzed as well. Factors as subtle as providing transportation to games, money for lessons, equipment, or proper clothing, or as overt as playing with their sons and daughters or offering instructional "hints" also create the social milieu of the child's sportsworld. Unfortunately, most of us have not consistently taken these factors into consideration in our research.

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Another powerful determinant of continuation or attrition relates to support and approval from peers. For example, do social approval and affiliation become so strong a motivating force in the decision to enter sport that they overshadow other factors such as skill level and ability? If so, could peer influence create such a strong value climate that performance only becomes a consideration after the child experiences success or failure? Obviously such dynamics are complex and difficult to identify; yet they indirectly suggest that perception of ability, causes of performance outcome, and reasons for participation might not be as clear cut as described in the existing literature.

One specific example that comes to mind is William Foote Whyte's description of the bowling team in Street Corner Society. It seemed that the most skilled bowler did not have the best score. To Whyte's surprise, the leader of the gang, whose skill was not as high as the others on the team, had the highest score. In what is now viewed as a classic finding -- because it was the first to describe how social structure influenced performance and behavior -- Whyte noted that each member's score was more a reflection of social status in the gang than it was of his bowling ability.

Several additional factors are directly related to this point: normative structure of the peer group, team composition, and informal as well as formal social arrangements the league.

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Each of these factors can place a constraint on participation by preventing or enhancing an individual's integration into the sport program. As a consequence, value climates created by structural organization, the coach and the peer group might also affect decisions regarding continued involvement or withdrawal from sport. Not only would such considerations more fully describe the sport milieu of the individual, but they also increase our understanding of additional factors and circumstances that surround such decisions.

Perhaps more typical of sociological perspectives than psychological ones, several factors related to social structure might also be incorporated in dropout studies. Factors such as social class, ethnic or racial background, and gender come to mind, because each provides some information about the social condition and consequences of some form of group identity. Indirectly or directly these variables could lead to an increased understanding of how such characteristics could impose constraints on participation or influence the perception and use of opportunities. For example, is the competitive setting more exploitive of blacks than whites because the black value structure is so committed to success in sport? Could past socialization influences of females or other ethnic groups be in conflict with program orientations and goals? How easy or difficult is it for individuals to integrate into a sport milieu that emphasizes achievement, competition, instrumentality, or

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success when as a group these individuals have been socialized into cooperative, passive, expressive, or egalitarian orientations?

Obviously, each consideration can help us understand how opportunities, options and alternatives are perceived. Hopefully such understandings will help us better explain why some individuals or groups tend to continue in sport while others do not.

Before concluding, some comments should address the ways in which we could take such considerations into account in our research. Otherwise, we might be left with the idea that this all sounds fine, but how do we get at these things. Certainly, those considerations that involve structural constraints imply more complex research designs than simple paper and pencil surveys. Still, use of multiple methods that combine observation, interview and general field study techniques could reasonably take care of some of the more serious concerns. It also becomes clear that no one study will be able to address all of our questions. Yet, a systematic approach that includes qualitative methodologies is needed, including those which try to get at the meaning and interpretation of experiences as seen by the participants themselves. Symbolic interaction approaches would appear to be the most appropriate for such a task. Additional techniques that might also prove effective would inlcude longitudinal analyses that follow participants' patterns

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over a period of time. Hopefully, some of these suggestions would reduce a few of the design-imposed difficulties.

With respect to these methodological issues, perhaps we should exercise some caution and not let our preference for specific research techniques limit our attempts to gain greater understanding. Furthermore, it might be quite fruitful to become more eclectic and less narrow in our theoretical approaches. Ultimately, broader perspectives in both domains might lead us to a much deeper understanding of why some individuals drop out of sport while others incorporate sport into their lifestyle and continue to participate for an entire lifetime. Dropping out of sport represents only one half of the phenomenon we are trying to understand; continuation is the second half. In order to understand one, we will need to understand both.

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